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from upstream to downstream and vice versa was accomplished by means of oxcarts. In the high water period, however, loaded pirogues ventured to descend the passes. Nowadays the railways offers such advantageous transportation that merchants no longer have any reason to expose their pirogues to the dangers of the Khône passes or to effect a transshipment by means of carts or bearers.

4. The maritime reach from South Khône to the sea.

For a distance of about 200 kilometers, that is to say from South Khône to Kratié (Cambodia), this reach is navigable for steam launches only during the high water period (July to October). It is navigable over a shorter distance, from Khône to Stung-Treng, in all seasons. From Kratié down to the sea steam navigation is possible all year long.

[60] Thus, despite its great rate of flow and the volume of its waters, the Mékong can be negotiated by steam launches only over a small part of its immense course. Here navigation will be interrupted by insurmountable changes in level, there it will be stopped by the rapidity of the current, and elsewhere a lack of water or sand will form an obstacle. In short, the Mékong is a capricious river and has, in addition to a few magnificent reaches where steam navigation is generally easy, rapids which render it dangerous and even impossible.

Under present conditions the Cochinchina River Merchant Fleet [compagnie des Messageries fluviales de Cochinchine] has been able to establish a fairly direct service by steam launch and pirogue from Saigon to Luang-Prabang, over a total distance of 2300 kilometers.

The following table shows the length in kilometers of possible journeys both by steam launch and by pirogue during high and low water periods.

439 [437] The conclusion to be drawn from the preceding tables is
178 not favorable toward orienting Laotian trade towards the ports of French Indo-China. It is evident that the export trend of animals and products shows a marked tendency to move towards Oubone and Siam. Indeed, Siam's share of total exports from Lower Laos (merchandise and animals), which was 179,627 francs in 1898, rose to 381,185 francs in 1899. This was an increase of more than double.

On the other hand, we see that the share of Annam, Cochinchina, and Cambodia in this same traffic, which was 699,712 francs in 1898, fell to 466,477 francs in 1899, representing an approximate decrease of one-third.

[496] The causes of this persistent and increasing orientation of Laotian trade towards Siam are perhaps to be sought in the opening of the railroad from Bangkok to Korat (1) as well as in the customs system of

(1) The king of Siam inaugurated this line on December 21, 1900.

French Indo-China.

439 There is no question but that the railroad constitutes a considerable
• 497 improvement over the old means of transport, as much by virtue of
505 the lower costs and shorter travel time as by the suppression of the dangers and bothers of the cart road from Korat to Bangkok (domestic duties, exactions of the local authorities, robberies, etc.). But are these reasons sufficient to explain or justify the admitted fact?

The River Merchant Fleet [Messageries fluviales] service is, as we have previously noted, the most rapid and least expensive means of transporting merchandise from Luang-Prabang to Saigon. Why then is this service, which is superior even in its present imperfection, scorned by exporters in general and used mainly by importers for products destined for the Europeans in Laos? The answer is a simple one. Exporters would not hesitate to use the Mekong route and to transport their products to Pnom-Penh or to Saigon-Cholon if, as they can do at Moulemein, at Xieng-Mai, at Nong-Khay, at Bassac, at Oubone, at Korat and at Bangkok, they could obtain [438] supplies there of imported merchandise from various sources to make up the counterpart of their exports. But, besides the fact that they would not be able to find certain special merchandise which is indispensable to them in the French marketplaces, they could not obtain the rest except at an increase of fifty or sixty percent or even more over the ordinary prices in the markets of Siam and Burma which we have just cited.